

Inquiry into Extremism In Victoria

Mr Benjamin Cronshaw

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14th April 2022

Submission to the Inquiry into Extremism in Victoria

This is an important Inquiry. There is a concerning rise to extremism across the western world, including radical-right political groups or anti-vaccination misinformation groups. Examining these extreme movements, what is causing them, and how governments and society can respond are all key questions.

With the last two years of the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia, this has been a hugely challenging time for many. It has tested many people's faith in government, health officials and the media. There can be legitimate questions raised about what these actors have done during the pandemic and e.g. whether mistakes were made or whether they could have done a better response. Many people can be overwhelmed by these dramatic and turbulent events and the challenges that that has brought, including lockdowns, economic downturns, isolation and pressure on mental health, public health measures, and concerns for their physical health. Questions about the efficacy of vaccines or whether they are right for an individual are legitimate questions that people have raised. Public health advertising, media information (such as Norman Swan on ABC's *Coronacast*) and local GPs have all played a critical role in giving people health advice, which for most people is that vaccines are safe and effective to protect themselves and the community. The search for information in this confusing time can, however, be exploited for misinformation. This has tragically been witnessed by the many people who may have been sceptical or apathetic about vaccines, but upon catching COVID (sometimes seriously or fatally) desperately tell people that they changed their mind and other people should get vaccinated. It is sad really to see people caught up in the misinformation that has been propagated or exploited by certain groups or public figures (including some Australian politicians). While the clear majority of Australians (some 95%+) trusted the health advice and got vaccinated, it is concerning where some people have been caught up in misinformation.

While extreme groups are responsible for the radicalism or misinformation that they propagate, this does not happen in a vacuum. It is occurring at time where there is decreasing trust in

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government, and in the media. Where people do not trust government or the media, then they may not trust the information that is provided to them (including about health measures or vaccination) or about the necessity of the public health measures that are put in place.

There can be big concerns for the potential and aims of these groups to perpetrate violence. Across the Tasman Sea, one of the worst terrorist attacks in recent years was perpetrated by a radicalised far-right Australian against the Muslim community in New Zealand with the Christchurch Mosque shootings in 2019. There was also an insurrectionary event in the United States, with the storming of the Capitol building to protest and prevent the certification of the election of President Joe Biden (an election that was by any reasonable measure was fairly won by Joe Biden, despite the absurd and damaging allegations of fraud). The January 6th event led to several deaths and injuries (including amongst both protestors and Capitol police).

There are various measures that could be taken by the government. Extreme groups that promote or perpetrate violence should be targeted and prosecuted for their crimes. Where they promote misinformation, they should be called out and countered with clear messaging by government and the media and public information campaigns. Given the declining trust in government or politicians, there should be an emphasis on integrity and regaining the trust of the community.

Thank you for considering my submission.

Kind Regards,

Benjamin Cronshaw.